

Amendments to the Claims:

Please amend claims 1, 3, 10, 12, 16, 22, 33, 43, and 44, cancel claims 21, 28, and 42 without prejudice, and add claims 45 and 46 as follows.

1. (currently amended): An apparatus for generating a strongly-ionized plasma in a chamber, the apparatus comprising:

an ionization source that generates a weakly-ionized plasma from a ~~volume of~~ feed gas, the weakly-ionized plasma reducing the probability of developing an electrical breakdown condition in the chamber;

a power supply that ~~applies~~ supplies power to the weakly-ionized plasma ~~though~~ an electrical pulse applied across the weakly-ionized plasma, the electrical pulse having a magnitude and a rise-time that is sufficient to increase the density of the weakly-ionized plasma to generate a strongly-ionized plasma; and

a gas line that supplies feed gas to means for exchanging the strongly-ionized plasma, the feed gas diffusing the strongly-ionized plasma, thereby allowing additional power from the pulsed power supply to be absorbed by the ~~with a second volume of feed gas applying the electrical pulse across the second volume of feed gas to generate an additional~~ strongly-ionized plasma.
2. (original): The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the power supply applies the electrical pulse across the weakly-ionized plasma to excite atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma and to generate secondary electrons, the secondary electrons ionizing the excited atoms, thereby creating the strongly-ionized plasma.
3. (currently amended): The apparatus of claim 1 ~~further comprising a wherein the gas line~~ supplies additional feed gas that gas exchange means for exchanging the weakly-ionized plasma ~~with a third volume of feed gas while applying the electrical pulse across the third volume of feed gas.~~

4. (original): The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the power supply generates a constant power.
5. (original): The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the power supply generates a constant voltage.
6. (original): The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the ionization source is chosen from the group comprising an electrode coupled to a DC power supply, an electrode coupled to an AC power supply, a UV source, an X-ray source, an electron beam source, an ion beam source, an inductively coupled plasma source, a capacitively coupled plasma source, and a microwave plasma source.
7. (original): The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising a magnet that is positioned to generate a magnetic field proximate to the weakly-ionized plasma, the magnetic field trapping electrons in the weakly-ionized plasma.
8. (original): The apparatus of claim 7 wherein the magnet comprises an electro-magnet.
9. (original): The apparatus of claim 7 wherein the magnet is movable.
10. (currently amended): A method for generating a strongly-ionized plasma in a chamber, the method comprising:

ionizing a ~~volume~~ feed gas to form a weakly-ionized plasma that reduces the probability of developing an electrical breakdown condition in the chamber;

supplying power to the weakly-ionized plasma by applying an electrical pulse across the weakly-ionized plasma to generate the, the electrical pulse having a magnitude and a rise-time that is sufficient to increase the density of the weakly-ionized plasma to generate a strongly-ionized plasma; and

diffusing the strongly-ionized plasma with additional feed gas thereby allowing exchanging the strongly-ionized plasma to absorb additional energy from the power supply with a second volume of feed gas while applying the electrical pulse across the second volume of feed gas to generate an additional strongly ionized plasma.

11. (original): The method of claim 10 wherein the applying the electrical pulse across the weakly-ionized plasma excites atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma and generates secondary electrons, the secondary electrons ionizing the excited atoms, thereby creating a strongly-ionized plasma.
12. (currently amended): The method of claim 10 further comprising exchanging the weakly-ionized plasma with additional feed gas ~~exchanging the weakly-ionized plasma with a third volume of feed gas while applying the electrical pulse across the third volume of feed gas.~~
13. (original): The method of claim 10 wherein the applying the electrical pulse comprises applying a quasi-static electric field across the weakly-ionized plasma.
14. (original): The method of claim 10 further comprising selecting at least one of a pulse amplitude and a pulse width of the electrical pulse in order to increase an ionization rate of the strongly-ionized plasma.
15. (original): The method of claim 10 further comprising selecting at least one of a pulse amplitude and a pulse width of the electrical pulse in order to cause the strongly-ionized plasma to be substantially uniform.
16. (currently amended): The method of claim 10 wherein the electrical pulse comprises a rise time that is less than about 100V/ μ sec. ~~between about 0.1 microsecond and 10 seconds.~~
17. (original): The method of claim 10 wherein the peak plasma density of the weakly-ionized plasma is less than about 10^{12} cm^{-3} .
18. (original): The method of claim 10 wherein the peak plasma density of the strongly-ionized plasma is greater than about 10^{12} cm^{-3} .
19. (original): The method of claim 10 wherein the ionizing the feed gas comprises exposing the feed gas to one of a static electric field, an pulsed electric field, UV radiation, X-ray radiation, electron beam radiation, and an ion beam.

20. (original): The method of claim 10 further comprising generating a magnetic field proximate to the weakly-ionized plasma, the magnetic field trapping electrons in the weakly-ionized plasma.
21. (canceled).
22. (currently amended): An apparatus for generating a strongly-ionized plasma, the apparatus comprising:

an anode;

a cathode that is positioned adjacent to the anode and forming a gap there between;

an ionization source that generates a weakly-ionized plasma proximate to the cathode, the weakly-ionized plasma reducing the probability of developing an electrical breakdown condition between the anode and the cathode; and

a power supply that produces an electric field across the gap, the electric field generating excited atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma and generating secondary electrons from the cathode, the secondary electrons ionizing the excited atoms, thereby creating the strongly-ionized plasma.
23. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the power supply generates a constant power.
24. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the power supply generates a constant voltage.
25. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the electric field comprises a quasi-static electric field.
26. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the electric field comprises a pulsed electric field.

27. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein a rise time of the electric field is chosen to increase an ionization rate of the excited atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma.
28. (canceled).
29. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the strongly-ionized plasma is substantially uniform proximate to the cathode.
30. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein a dimension of the gap between the anode and the cathode is chosen to increase an ionization rate of the excited atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma.
31. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the ionization source is chosen from the group comprising an electrode coupled to a DC power supply, an electrode coupled to an AC power supply, a UV source, an X-ray source, an electron beam source, an ion beam source, an inductively coupled plasma source, a capacitively coupled plasma source, and a microwave plasma source.
32. (original): The apparatus of claim 22 further comprising a magnet that is positioned to generate a magnetic field proximate to the weakly-ionized plasma, the magnetic field trapping electrons in the weakly-ionized plasma proximate to the cathode.
33. (currently amended): A method for generating a strongly-ionized plasma, the method comprising:

ionizing a feed gas to generate a weakly-ionized plasma proximate to a cathode, the weakly-ionized plasma reducing the probability of developing an electrical breakdown condition proximate to the cathode; and

applying an electric field across the weakly-ionized plasma in order to excite atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma and to generate secondary electrons from the cathode, the secondary electrons ionizing the excited atoms, thereby creating the strongly-ionized plasma.

34. (original): The method of claim 33 wherein the applying the electric field comprises applying a quasi-static electric field.
35. (original): The method of claim 33 wherein the applying an electric field comprises applying the electric field at a constant power.
36. (original): The method of claim 33 wherein the applying an electric field comprises applying the electric field at a constant voltage.
37. (original): The method of claim 33 wherein the applying the electric field comprises applying an electrical pulse across the weakly-ionized plasma.
38. (original): The method of claim 37 further comprising selecting at least one of a pulse amplitude and a pulse width of the electrical pulse in order to increase an ionization rate of the strongly-ionized plasma.
39. (original): The method of claim 37 further comprising selecting at least one of a pulse amplitude and a pulse width of the electrical pulse in order to cause the strongly-ionized plasma to be substantially uniform in an area adjacent to a surface of the cathode.
40. (original): The method of claim 33 wherein the strongly-ionized plasma is substantially uniform proximate to the cathode.
41. (original): The method of claim 33 further comprising generating a magnetic field proximate to the weakly-ionized plasma, the magnetic field trapping electrons in the weakly-ionized plasma.
42. (canceled).
43. (currently amended): An apparatus for generating a strongly-ionized plasma in a chamber, the apparatus comprising:

means for ionizing a ~~volume of~~ feed gas to form a weakly-ionized plasma that reduces the probability of developing an electrical breakdown condition in the chamber;

means for supplying power to the weakly-ionized plasma by applying an electrical pulse across the weakly-ionized plasma to generate the, the electrical pulse having a magnitude and a rise-time that is sufficient to increase the density of the weakly-ionized plasma to generate a strongly-ionized plasma; and

means for diffusing the strongly-ionized plasma with additional feed gas to allow additional power to be absorbed by exchanging the strongly-ionized plasma with a second volume of feed gas while applying the electrical pulse across the second volume of feed gas to generate an additional strongly-ionized plasma.

44. (currently amended): An apparatus for generating a strongly-ionized plasma, the apparatus comprising:

means for ionizing a feed gas to generate a weakly-ionized plasma proximate to a cathode, the weakly-ionized plasma reducing the probability of developing an electrical breakdown condition proximate to the cathode; and

means for applying an electric field across the weakly-ionized plasma in order to excite atoms in the weakly-ionized plasma and to generate secondary electrons from the cathode, the secondary electrons ionizing the excited atoms, thereby creating the strongly-ionized plasma.

45. (new): The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the power supply comprises the ionization source.
46. (new): The apparatus of claim 22 wherein the power supply comprises the ionization source.